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SUBJECT: THE AMAZIGH (BERBERS), PART II: ERFOUD AND RISSANI

REF: RABAT 540

Classified By: Pol/C Timothy Lenderking, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: This is the second in a series of cables drawn from a combined outreach and reporting trip by Poloff and PAO to the anti-Atlas from March 10-17. Erfoud is a medium-sized town, which is quickly becoming a tourist hub for the region, whereas Rissani is a small town on the road south of Erfoud. With the lack of water in the region, traditional date farming, which was the main source of income, is dying out. The tourist industry is now the main employer in the area. While the tourist industry "sells" Amazigh culture and history to visitors, the local inhabitants understand themselves to be fully integrated and not to have a separate identity from other Moroccans. At the same time, leading citizens indicated that other towns and areas benefit more from the regional governmental structure than the Erfoud-Rissani area does. End Summary.

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On the Road  
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¶2. (U) The road from Rabat to Irfrane, the location of the only English-language university in Morocco, Al-Akhawayn, winds through agricultural fields to the foothills of the Middle Atlas mountain range. In the second week of March, the remains of a major snowstorm in February were still visible. Al-Akhawayn University is designed like a small French village -- small, modern buildings with red, pitched roofs.

¶3. (U) The road slowly winds through the mountains to Midelt. Midelt lies on the northern side of the mountains and has a large Amazigh population. Hassan Aourid, the Wali of Meknes-Tafilalt (reftel), established an Amazigh center and museum in Midelt. It is in Midelt where a visitor is initially exposed to the selling of Amazigh culture. Souvenir vendors, who concentrate on fossils and minerals from the mountains, readily admit that there is no other employment in Midelt. From Midelt, the road winds through the mountains, and descends to Er Rachidia, the largest town in the anti-Atlas. The drive south to Erfoud is through foothills and eventually desert.

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Erfoud  
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¶4. (SBU) Erfoud is a busy place, clearly directing its

economic energies towards tourism. Billing itself as the "threshold of the desert," Erfoud attracts European campers in vans and busloads of tourists who will spend time riding camels on the Saharan dunes in Merzouga to the southeast. The main road south is lined with tourist shops, selling cultural artifacts from rugs to jewelry, and places to eat. Driving through Erfoud, cars and trucks vie for road space with bicycles. The cyclers are of all ages and both sexes: men and boys, as well as women and girls with scarves. (Note: While it is usually assumed that a women or girl with a scarf covering her hair is making a religious statement, the truth may have more to do with other cultural patterns, e.g., the lack of water mitigates against daily hair washing; the wind and sand quickly make hair dirty; and, riding a bicycle with hair whipping around one's face would be dangerous. The women and girls knotted their scarves or tied them gently in the back, two more indicators that these people were not exhibiting conservative Muslim leanings. Conversations with the population indicated various reasons for women wearing scarves, not all of which were indicators of strict interpretations of Islam. End Note.)

¶5. (SBU) As the traditional date farming in the Erfoud area has declined, the population is mostly employed in aspects of the tourist industry. The industry caters to all levels of tourists from backpackers to tour buses. A hotel training institute is located on the outskirts of Erfoud. (Comment: The water problems in the Erfoud-Rissani area are obvious. A dam in Er Rachidia has partially created the problem, i.e., available water resources are being used to the north, but, the lack of rain in the last ten years in the entire eastern section of the anti-Atlas has exacerbated the water shortage problem. Palm trees are dead or dying and there is insufficient water to use in the irrigation system. Throughout the anti-Atlas, the traditional irrigation system is used: plots of land have soil berms around them, water floods the plot. The water allotment system is based on trust, each person knows how much water he is allowed and only uses that amount. The water measurement is the "tartassed" in Amazigh and is both a unit and an amount of time. Note that the tourism industry will likely demand greater water resources, as tourists will use more water than the local population. End Comment.)

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Rissani  
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¶6. (U) The two-lane road south of Erfoud to Rissani is lined with what once were extensive date palm farms. Today, most of the trees are dead or dying and the ground has patches of salt. In early (Roman) and late antiquity, Rissani was a major caravan center because of the oasis which was known as "Sijilmassa." With the oasis mostly gone and the date farm industry all but over, the poverty in the area is visible: multi-storeyed mudbrick houses, known as "kasbahs," are falling down, water is brought by women from central faucets, and, young children beg for dirhams from tourists.

¶7. (U) Modern Rissani is known as the founding place for the current ruling Moroccan dynasty, the Alaouite. A museum in the town, the Alaouite Research Center, attempts to depict Alaouite history, using Sijilmassa as the basis. The panels were created by the American archaeologist who excavated the site and are the primary museum display. The panels explicate the site's history and the importance of the gold from Sudan. (Note: The Moroccan archaeologist present would not comment on pre-Islamic inhabitation at the site. End Note.)

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Being Amazigh in Erfoud and Rissani  
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¶8. (C) On March 12, Missionoffs met with Houcine Boubekri, an Amazigh English teacher, who may become the regional English coordinator for the Ministry of National Education.

Boubekri described himself as an "integrated Berber," which means "someone who accepts life as it is." Part of the reason why Boubekri defines himself as integrated has to do with the history of the Amazigh in the Erfoud-Rissani area. The Amazigh have intermarried with Arabs for centuries, although there were severe tensions in the 1960s between the two groups. (Note: Boubekri seemed to be alluding to difficulties immediately following independence. When pushed, he would not discuss Moroccan national issues. End Note.) When problems occur between the individuals, reconciliations are reached in the mosques. From Boubekri's perspective, the population is "a bit of everything" because of the caravans. (Note: Boubekri said there are racial problems in Souss-Massa to the west (reftel), because the sub-Saharan African population, who were originally slaves brought to work in the fields, has not intermarried. End Note.) The most important Amazigh characteristic with which Boubekri identifies is "tamsumat," or, "to take the diplomatic way." Following "tamsumat," an Amazigh must be a noble man, who is honorable and diplomatic.

¶9. (C) For Boubekri, the important organizations with which to work are local ones, not those in Rabat (reftel). Local associations should concentrate on economic and social development and not on, as Boubekri said, "Berber identity or Berber language." If people want to know those things, he asserted, they should learn them at home. Parliamentarians in the Erfoud area are predominantly centrist; the National Democratic Party (PND) is the most appealing, he said. Women are not involved, according to Boubekri. Boubekri's "raison d'etre" appeared to be to maintain the Erfoud area as it once was with date palm farms. (Note: This theme was repeated consistently. While educated individuals know the GOM and the regional government can do little about the water shortage, the general impression given was that all the GOM needed to do was "push a button" and everything would be as it used to be in the Erfoud area. End Note.) Parliamentarians and business people are, according to Boubekri, concentrating on finding solutions to the lack of water. For Boubekri, if there was water, the people would return from Rabat, Casablanca and Europe; and, even more significantly, he thinks they would gladly return to their old ways of living, e.g., herding sheep.

¶10. (C) Boubekri guided Missionoffs through a partially restored "kasbah" or large family dwelling which would originally have accommodated between 400 to 500 people. He was proud of the kasbah which is being refurbished with private funds. He was, however, more proud of the gender differentiation within the kasbah, e.g., the area around the gate was for the men and the wells were for the women. (Comment: When asked why he did not live in a restored kasbah, Boubekri said he was not married and lived in a concrete house. His appreciation for the kasbah seemed to extend to a romantic view of what the past was like in Erfoud. End Comment.)

¶11. (C) Boubekri showed no interest in the Western Sahara issue, and, he discounted the new Family Status Code, the "moudawana." He said the people in the Erfoud area "do not really care" about the moudawana because they had the same rights prior to the new code. His implication was that the code was for an Arab population, although he did not state that specifically. When asked about judges and the court system in implementing the new family reform, he said the judges used "tamsumat" before the institution of the moudawana, and, he was sure they would continue to do so. Boubekri implied an Amazigh tribal adjudication system, again without being specific.

¶12. (C) Mubarak Achabrou, an Arabic and Amazigh teacher in the Erfoud-Rissani area, echoed Boubekri's attitude -- he also thinks that integration of the Amazigh has happened and is fine. Achabrou, however, is actively engaged in teaching the language and is himself a poet, involved in the oral Amazigh culture. Like his father before him, he recites poetry at weddings and cultural events. While arguing strongly for a standard Amazigh language because the three

main groups (reftel) do not necessarily understand each other, he did not relate language to a political identity. Achabrou desires an Amazigh identity within the larger cultural identity of Morocco. He did, however, stress that he understood why others, e.g., people in Rabat, felt differently. Wanting to be understood, he underscored the importance of the long-term Moroccan military base which was in Erfoud under King Hassan II. He implied that the population in the area lived under intimidation and that their attitudes were still colored by the past.

¶13. (C) Over dinner on March 12, Missionoffs met with Abdelrahman Bel Hassan, the president of the Erfoud commune; Moulay Mustapha Idrissi, an area businessman; Abdlaziz Mestouri, a pharmacist and journalist for La Liberation (Note: La Liberation is one of the French-language newspapers, affiliated with the left-wing Socialist Union Popular Forces, USFP. End Note.); Malika Dejjari, a teacher and member of a human rights organization; and Malika Akhenji, secretary of the Amelagou Association. (Note: Amelagou is a village in the Atlas mountain range, approximately four hours from Erfoud. Akhenji and her colleagues traveled to Erfoud to meet Missionoffs. End Note.) According to the dinner participants, the Erfoud area is isolated from Er Rachidia and the rest of the Meknes-Tafilalt region and suffers because of this. There is a lack of attention paid to the area on the part of the government, and the regional government is not dealing with the water problems adequately, they said. Waste water is a problem in the area; however, the commune cannot afford the 30 percent of the cost the government is expecting it to provide, according to Bel Hassan. (Note: Solid waste disposal is also an issue in the Erfoud-Rissani area; however, water was the main concern. End Note.)

¶14. (C) Of the dinner participants, Bel Hassan was the most outspoken concerning political parties, as might be expected being an elected official. His opinion is that only the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) is organized, and, it is the only party which may be able to assist people. While Idrissi, Mestouri, and Dejjari were not as vocal, they echoed Bel Hassan's sentiments. Bel Hassan, however, was the only participant who said he would change his party affiliation, presently with the National Democratic Party (PND), to the PJD. Like Boubekri and Achabrou, Bel Hassan viewed Amazighs to be fully integrated; he does not understand how anyone could trace their Amazigh heritage. He said that some of his ancestors were Arabs to emphasize how integrated the population is.

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Comment  
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¶15. (C) Discussions in the Erfoud-Rissani area focused on the lack of distinctions between Amazigh and others. Being integrated into the wider Moroccan society was most important to those with whom Missionoffs spoke. Local issues, including the lack of potable water, waste water management, employment and the tourist industry, are foremost in people's minds. An interesting point, however, is that the tourist industry is selling Berber (Amazigh) culture to visitors: the industry is selling a distinct identity, yet the population seems to be integrated, or, at least, wanted Missionoffs to understand the population as integrated.

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